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# THE WORLD OF INTERIORS





This page: the entrance to 44 Rue François Premier as it was in 1964. Opposite: inside, the



## CHIC TO CHIC

When Pierre Balmain set up a fashion house in 1945, his illustrious clients were in heaven, attended to amid the Louis XVI elegance of his Parisian premises. Though that décor was subsequently altered, a new redesign has restored to the mansion a sense of the original Balmain, for whom couture and architecture went hand in hand. Text: Geneviève Dortignac. A story by Marie-France Boyer. Photography: Adrien Dirand





A room on the first floor is partly divided by a vertical mirrored stele – an homage to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* – while 1940s-style furniture picks up the colours of the 19th-century breccia-marble fireplace



Top: at the foot of the staircase in the entrance hall is an 18th-century marble bust of Flora from *Origines*. On the other side, a 1940s chair by René Prou sits next to a table designed in 1949 by André Arbus and Gilbert Poillierat. Above left: an 18th-century-style door opens into the private salon, or fitting room. Above right: a photograph from 1960 shows Balmain with the actress Paulette Goddard at the Hôtel George V



Top: on the landing, a *manoir*-style lantern in gold leaf, made by Pouenat Ferronnier, hangs above a 19th-century bench of Carrara marble from Galerie Marc Maison. Above left: taken in 1964, this photograph shows one of the first-floor salons serving as a hat shop. Display models are set into niches like antique busts. Above right: myriad reflections on the first-floor landing increase the already large space

**THE HISTORY OF** the Balmain couture house is bookended by two critical encounters. The first concerns the site, happened upon by chance one day in 1945 when the young couturier Pierre Balmain was strolling along Rue François Premier with a friend, looking for an apartment. In front of No. 44, German soldiers were busy moving out a batch of archives. The house they were leaving behind them was available for rent, but only on a commercial lease. Although not very practical, the rooms were big enough to house the studio, and the salon had sufficient space to receive clients. So Balmain took the decision to set up his own fashion house on the premises, and he wasted no time in handing in his notice to Lucien Lelong.

Sixty-five years on, the second encounter took place between Christophe Decarnin, Balmain's creative director, and the interior designer/architect Joseph Dirand, who was given carte blanche to redesign the premises, which had undergone a number of conversions. For Dirand, who specialises in pared-down polished spaces, the aim was to give back to the building its soul and its history. The idea of 'restoring the DNA' of the venue with the art director, Franck Durand, was very attractive to him. As a result, today the atmosphere at Balmain is that of a private mansion in the golden age of couture, when, among the 80 couture 'houses' in Paris, fashion's big beasts were Balenciaga, Schiaparelli, Vionnet, Chanel, Patou and Dior.

Having left his native Savoy in the French Alps for Paris, Balmain studied architecture at the behest of his mother, who disapproved of her son's going into couture. This, however, was to ignore the truculence of a young man in the grip of an obsession. Balmain had already made his mind up that his ambitions in the world of fashion would be rewarded with success. After an initial apprenticeship with Edward Molyneux, he entered the Lelong design studio, where he worked with Christian Dior.

In the autumn of 1945 Balmain's first collection propelled him officially into Parisian life. The walls of the salon were repainted aquamarine, inspired by the pale tints of the French Regency period, set off by white linen curtains. The former bathroom served as a studio. The desk consisted of a plank laid across the bathtub and the kitchen was used for storing fabrics. The team was made up of 24 people, 16 of them seamstresses. And in spite of her reservations about her son going into the world of couture, it was Balmain's mother who assumed the role of banker. They retained the ceiling adorned with cherubs painted by a Princess de Broglie around 1870 when she lived in the property, and clients were seated on copies of Louis XVI chairs. At the forefront of the clientèle was the writer Gertrude Stein, muse of the Cubist painters, her friend Alice B. Toklas and the photographer Cecil Beaton, who attended all the fashionable gatherings. A short time later, in 1947, the couturier unveiled the 'Kiosque des Fantaisies' decoration for his 'Jolie Madame', an unforgettable embodiment of the chic Parisienne of the time, with little dog in tow; in 1953 came a perfume of the same name, 'allowing the woman to achieve her heart's desire', as Balmain explained. In this new interior everything was pearl grey – the walls, the satin upholstered chairs, the draped hangings and even the uniforms of the saleswomen. But this décor was short-lived.

Today the floor is of Burgundy stone studded with black cabochons, the plaster is set off with gold, and the double staircase looks like that of a private mansion. Everything appears authentic, kept just as it was, but in fact it is all either new or purchased from specialists in antique materials. The ceilings have been created by a master in decorative plaster from Versailles, using traditional methods. The wrought-iron handrail was designed by Joseph Dirand based on an 18th-century model found in an old monastery in Arles. Imposts, mouldings, window casement bolts, wrought ironwork, woodwork – all the trades involved here exhibit a return to individual skill, a luxury that stems from the demanding nature of the house of Balmain.

The monumental flight of stone stairs is the masterpiece of the entrance. Here, too, you can spot an occasional table by Arbus and a forged metal console table by Poillierat, flanked by wall lights by Royère. The 1940s furniture chosen from this circle of brilliant interior designers links contemporary Balmain with the original designer.

On the first floor Joseph Dirand has done away with the partition walls. The salons now occupy an area of 200sq m. They are arranged into a suite of adjoining rooms bathed in natural light. The immediate impression in these vast rooms is one of an elegant, intimate and welcoming interior. Sofas covered in grey flannel combine with armchairs upholstered in black velvet, specially designed for the house; then there are 18th-century busts of Flora and Apollo, a chair by Prou and a marble fireplace modelled on the one in the Petit Trianon at Versailles: the overall effect produces an indefinable sensation of wellbeing. It also brings a sense of modernity. 'When we put up the [mirrored] stela, I had an emotional moment,' Joseph explains. 'I don't set out to impress; what I'm looking for is a rather striking and, in this case especially, sophisticated balance.' Standing like abstract sculptures, the stela mark the different areas of transition. Opposite the mirrors on the walls, they create endless poetic images. Some of the furniture has been designed by the architect along the elementary lines so dear to him. If everything has its place, nothing is due to chance: neither the clothes hanging on the minimal line of gilded rails nor the video screen disguised in the black-tinted cupboard with contrasting gold ornamentation. Two boudoirs measuring 20sq m, hidden by pale curtains, are provided for trying on clothes.

Balmain always established a strong link between architecture and couture. He would scribble plans for houses in the margins of his design sketches, and was convinced that it is the aim of both disciplines to make the world more beautiful, with couture being 'the architecture of movement'. As he said: 'Architect and couturier express themselves with their own personality and yet by complying with initial data which for one is the configuration of the ground, the space to be filled, and for the other the female form. The fact that one builds in stone and the other in chiffon, that one tries to withstand the passage of centuries and the other requires just one season, do not make an essential difference. They both create in three dimensions, in volume' ■

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The sculptural mirrored stelae placed throughout the salons distort the space and mislead the eye – as here, where a blazer seems to have partly disappeared. It hangs over a cross-legged stool designed by Joseph Dirand in homage to Raymond Subes and upholstered in white velvet by Dominique Kieffer. Louis XVI-style plaster ornamentation defines the wall, while the 19th-century parquet flooring lends warmth